

A close-up photograph of a cake with white frosting and red strawberries. The cake is decorated with several strawberries and white frosting swirls. The background is dark and out of focus.

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A FACE IN
THE CROWD

STEWART
O'NAN

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The summer after his wife died, Dean Evers started watching a lot of baseball. Like so many snowbirds from New England, he was a Red Sox fan who'd fled the nor'easters for the Gulf Coast of Florida and magnanimously adopted the Devil Rays, then perennial punching bags, as his second team. While he'd coached Little League, he'd never been a big fan—never obsessed, the way his son Pat was—but, night after night, as the gaudy sunset colored the West, he found himself turning on the Rays game to fill his empty condo.

He knew it was just a way of passing time. He and Ellie had been married forty-six years, through the good and the bad, and now he had no one who remembered any of it. She was the one who'd lobbied him to move to St. Pete, and then, not five years after they packed up the house, she had her stroke. The terrible thing was that she was in great shape. They'd just played a bracing set of tennis at the club. She'd beat him again, meaning he bought the drinks. They were sitting under an umbrella, sipping chilled gin-and-tonics, when she winced and pressed a hand over one eye.

"Brain freeze?" he asked.

She didn't move, sat there stuck, her other eye fixed, staring far beyond him.

"El," he said, reaching to touch her bare shoulder. Later, though the doctor said it was impossible, he would remember her skin being cold.

She folded face first onto the table, scattering their glasses, bringing the waiters and the manager and the lifeguard from the pool, who gently laid her head on a folded towel and knelt beside her, monitoring her pulse until the EMTs arrived. She lost everything on her right side, but she was alive, that was what mattered, except, quickly, not a month after she finished her PT and came home from the rehab, she had a second, fatal stroke while he was giving her a shower, a scene which replayed in his mind so often that he decided he had to move to a new place, which brought him here, to a

bayside high-rise where he knew no one, and anything that helped pass the time was welcome.

He ate while he watched the game. He made his own dinner now, having tired of eating alone in restaurants and ordering expensive takeout. He was still learning the basics. He could make pasta and grill a steak, cut up a red pepper to crown a bag salad. He had no finesse, and too often was discouraged at the results, taking little pleasure in them. Tonight was a pre seasoned pork chop he'd picked up at the Publix. Just stick it in a hot pan and go, except he could never tell when meat was done. He got the chop crackling, threw a salad together, and set a place at the coffee table, facing the TV. The fat at the bottom of the pan was beginning to char. He poked the meat with a finger, testing for squishiness, but couldn't be sure. He took a knife and cut into it, revealing a pocket of blood. The pan was going to be hell to clean.

And then, when he finally sat down and took his first bite, the chop was tough. "Terrible," he heckled himself. "Chef Ramsay you ain't."

The Rays were playing the Mariners, meaning the stands were empty. When the Sox or Yanks were in town, the Trop was packed, otherwise the place was deserted. In the bad old days it made sense, but now the club was a serious contender. As David Price breezed through the lineup, Evers noted with dismay several fans in the padded captain's chairs behind the plate talking on their cell phones. Inevitably, one teenager began waving like a castaway, presumably to the person on the other end, watching at home.

"Look at me," Evers said. "I'm on TV, therefore I exist."

The kid waved for several pitches. He was right over the umpire's shoulder, and when Price dropped in a backdoor curve, the replay zoomed on the Met Life strike zone, magnifying the kid's idiotic grin as he waved in slow motion. Two rows behind him, sitting alone in his white sanitary smock with his thin, pomaded hair slicked back, solid and stoic as a tiki god, was Evers's old dentist from Shrewsbury, Dr. Young.

Young Dr. Young, his mother had called him, because even when Evers was a child, he'd been old. He'd been a Marine in the Pacific, had come back from Tarawa missing part of a leg and all of his hope. He'd spent the rest of his life exacting his revenge not on the Japanese but on the children of Shrewsbury, finding soft spots in their enamel with the pitiless point of his stainless steel hook and plunging needles into their gums.

Evers stopped chewing and leaned forward to be sure. The greased-back hair and Mount Rushmore forehead, the Coke-bottle bifocals and thin lips that went white when he bore down with the drill—yes, it was him, and not a day older than when Evers had last seen him, over fifty years ago.

It couldn't be. He'd be at least ninety. But the humid air that was Florida was full of men his age, many of them well preserved, near mummified beneath their guayaberas and tans.

No, Evers thought, he'd smoked. It was another thing Evers hated about him, the stale reek of his breath and his clothes as he loomed in close over him, trying to get leverage. The red pack fit the pocket of his smock—Lucky Strikes, filterless, the true coffin nails. *L.S.M.F.T.*, that was the old slogan: *Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco*. Perhaps it was a younger brother, or a son. Even Younger Dr. Young.

Price blew a fastball by the batter to end the inning and a commercial intervened, hauling Evers back to the present. His pork chop was tough as a catcher's mitt. He tossed it in the trash and grabbed a beer. The first cold gulp sobered him. There was no way that was his Dr. Young, with his shaky morning-after hands and more than a hint of gin under his cigarette breath. Nowadays they'd call his condition PTSD, but to a kid at the mercy of his instruments, it didn't matter. Evers had despised him, had surely at some point wished him, if not dead, then gone.

When the Rays came to bat, the teenager was waving again, but the rows behind him were vacant. Evers kept an eye out, expecting Dr. Young to come back with a beer and a hot dog, yet as the innings passed and Price's strikeouts mounted, the seat remained empty. Nearby, a woman in a sparkly top was now waving to the folks at home.

He wished Ellie were there to tell, or that he could call his mother and ask whatever happened to Young Dr. Young, but, as with so much of his daily existence, there was no one to share it with. More likely than not, the man was just another old guy with nothing better to do than waste his leftover evenings watching baseball, only at the park instead of at home.

Late that night, around three, Evers could easily see why of all the possible punishments prisoners feared solitary confinement the most. At some point a beating had to stop, but a thought could go on and on, feeding and then feeding on insomnia. Why Dr. Young, who he hadn't thought of in years? Was it a sign? An omen? Or was he—as he feared he might when they told him Ellie had died—gradually losing his grip on this world?

To prove those doubts wrong, he spent the next day running errands around town, chatting with the clerk at the post office, and the woman at the circulation desk of the library—just small talk, but still, a connection, something to build on. Like every summer, Pat and his family had taken off for the Cape and Sue's folks' place. Evers called their machine anyway and left a message. When they came back they should really get together. He'd love to take them all out to dinner somewhere, their choice, or maybe a ballgame.

That evening he prepared his dinner as if nothing had happened, though now he was very aware of the time, and ended up rushing his grilled chicken so he could catch the first pitch. The Rays were playing the Mariners again, and again attendance was sparse, the upper deck a sea of blue. Evers settled in to watch, ignoring where the pitch was, focusing instead on the third row just to the left of the umpire. As if to answer his question with a cosmic Bronx cheer, Raymond, the team's mascot, a creature with blue fur not found anywhere in the natural world, flopped across the seats, shaking his fist behind Ichiro's back.

"You're going slack whacky," Evers said. "That's all."

The Mariners' ace, Felix Hernandez, was going for them, and King Felix was on. The game was fast. By the time Evers cracked his nightly beer, it was the sixth and the M's were up by a couple. It was then, just as King Felix caught Ben Zobrist looking, that Evers saw, three rows deep, in the same pinstripe suit he was buried in, his old business partner Leonard Wheeler.

Leonard Wheeler—always Leonard, never Lennie—was eating a hot dog and washing it down with what ESPN's *Sports Center* smartasses were pleased to call "an adult beverage." For a moment, too startled for denial, Evers defaulted to the outrage the merest thought of Wheeler could call up from his gut even now. "You controlling son of a bitch!" he shouted, and dropped his own adult beverage, which he'd just been bringing to his lips. The can fell into the tray balanced on his lap and knocked it to the floor between his feet, where the chicken, instant mashed potatoes, and Birds Eye string beans (also of a color not found in the natural world) lay on the carpet in a foaming puddle of beer.

Evers didn't notice, only stared at his new television, which was so state-of-the-art that he sometimes felt he could simply hoick up a leg, duck his head to keep from bumping the frame, and step right into the picture. It was

Wheeler, all right: same gold-rimmed glasses, same jutting jaw and weirdly plump lips, same head of flamboyant snow-white hair that made him look like a soap opera star—the mature lead who plays either a saintly doctor or a tycoon cuckolded by his sleazy trophy wife. There was no mistaking the oversize flag pin in his lapel either. He'd always worn that damned thing like a jackleg congressman. Ellie once joked that Lennie (when it was just them, they always called him that) probably tucked it under his pillow before he went to sleep.

Then the denial rushed in, swarming over his initial shock the way white blood cells swarm into a fresh cut. Evers closed his eyes, counted to five, then popped them wide, sure he'd see someone who just looked like Wheeler, or—perhaps worse—no one at all.

The shot had changed. Instead of a new batter stepping in, the camera focused on the Mariners' left fielder, who was doing a peculiar little dance.

"Never seen that one before," one of the Rays' announcers said. "What the heck is Wells up to, Dewayne?"

"Li'l crunk move, I 'spec," Dewayne Staats vamped, and they both chuckled.

Enough with the sparkling repartee, Evers thought. He shuffled his feet and managed to step on his beer-soaked chicken breast. *Go back to the damn home plate shot.*

As if the producer in his gadget-loaded broadcast truck had heard him, the shot switched back, but only for a second. Luke Scott hit a bullet to the Mariners' second baseman, and in the wink of an eye, the Trop was gone and Evers was left with the Aflac duck, who was plugging holes in a rowboat even as it plugged insurance.

Evers got halfway up before his knees gave way and he collapsed back into his chair. The cushion made a tired wooshing sound. He took a deep breath, let it out, and felt a little stronger. This time he made it to his feet and trundled into the kitchen. He got the carpet cleaner from under the sink and read the instructions. Ellie wouldn't have needed to read them. Ellie would have simply made some half-irritated, half-amused comment ("You can dress him up, but you can't take him out" was a favorite) and gone to work making the mess disappear.

"That was not Lennie Wheeler," he told the empty living room as he came back. "No way it was."

The duck was gone, replaced by a man and his wife smooching on a patio. Soon they would go upstairs and make Viagra-aided love, because this was the age of knowing how to get things done. Evers, who also knew how to get things done (he'd read the instructions on the can, after all), fell on his knees, returned his sopping dinner to the tray in a series of plops, then sprayed a small cloud of Resolve on the remaining crud, knowing there'd probably be a stain anyway.

"Lennie Wheeler is as dead as Jacob Marley. I went to his funeral."

Indeed he had, and although his face had remained appropriately grave and regretful throughout, he'd enjoyed it. Laughter might be the best medicine, but Dean Evers believed outliving your enemies was the best revenge.

Evers and Wheeler had met in business school, and had started Speedy Truck Rental on a shoestring after Wheeler had found what he called "a gaping hole the size of the Sumner Tunnel" in the New England market. In those early days Evers hadn't minded Wheeler's overbearing manner, perfectly summed up by a plaque on the man's office wall: WHEN I WANT MY OPINION, I'LL ASK YOU FOR IT. In those days, before Evers had begun to find his own way, he'd needed that kind of attitude. Wheeler, he sometimes thought, had been the steel in his spine. But young men grow up and develop their own ideas.

After twenty years Speedy had become the biggest independent truck rental outfit in New England, one of the few untainted by either organized crime or IRS problems. That was when Leonard Wheeler—never Lennie except when Evers and his wife were safely tucked into bed and giggling like a couple of kids—decided it was time to go national. Evers finally stood up on his hind legs and demurred. Not gently, as in previous disagreements, but firmly. Loudly, even. Everyone in the office had heard them, he had no doubt, even with the door closed.

The game came back on while he was waiting for the Resolve to set. Hellickson was still dealing for the Rays, and he was sharp. Not as sharp as Hernandez, though, and on any other night Evers would have been sending him brain-wave encouragement. Not tonight. Tonight he sat back on his heels at the base of his chair with his bony knees on either side of the stain he was trying to clean up, peering at the stands behind home plate.

There was Wheeler, still right there, now drinking a beer with one hand and holding a cell phone in the other. Just the sight of the phone filled Evers

with outrage. Not because cell phones should be outlawed in ballparks like smoking, but because Wheeler had died of a heart attack long before such things were in general use. He had no *right* to it!

"Oh-oh, that's a *loo-oong* drive!" Dewayne Staats was bellowing. "Justin Smoak smoked *ooo-oill* of that one!"

The camera followed the ball into the nearly deserted stands, and lingered to watch two boys fighting over it. One emerged victorious and waved it at the camera, pumping his hips in a singularly obscene manner as he did so.

"Fuck you!" Evers shouted. "You're on TV, so what?"

He hardly ever used such language, but had he not said that very same thing to his partner during the argument over the expansion? Yes. Nor had it just been *Fuck you*. It had been *Fuck you, Lennie*.

"And what I did, you deserved it." He was dismayed to discover he was on the verge of tears. "You wouldn't take your foot off my neck, Leonard. I did what I had to do."

Now the camera returned to where it belonged, which was showing Smoak doing his home run trot, and pointing at the sky—well, *dome*—as he crossed home plate to the apathetic applause of the two dozen or so Mariner fans in attendance.

Kyle Seager stood in. Behind him, in the third row, the seat where Wheeler had been was empty.

It wasn't him, Evers thought, scrubbing the stain (that barbecue sauce was simply not going to come up). *It was just someone who looked like him*.

That hadn't worked very well with Young Doctor Young, and it didn't work at all now.

Evers turned off the TV and decided he'd go to bed early.

Useless. Sleep didn't come at ten or at midnight. At two o'clock he took one of Ellie's Ambiens, hoping it wouldn't kill him—it was eighteen months past the expiration date. It didn't, but it didn't put him to sleep either. He took another half a tablet and lay in bed thinking of a plaque he'd kept in his own office. It said GIVE ME A LEVER LONG ENOUGH, A FULCRUM STRONG ENOUGH, AND I'LL MOVE THE WORLD. Far less arrogant than Wheeler's plaque, but perhaps more useful.

When Wheeler refused to let him out of the partnership agreement Evers had foolishly signed when he'd been young and humble, he'd needed that kind of lever to shift his partner. As it so happened, he had one. Leonard

Wheeler had a taste for the occasional young boy. Oh, not young young, not jailbait, but college age. Wheeler's personal assistant, Martha, had confided to Evers one rum-soaked night at a convention in Denver that Wheeler was partial to the lifeguard type. Later, sober and remorseful, she'd begged him never to say a word to anyone. Wheeler was a good boss, she said, hard but good, and his wife was a dream. The same was true of his son and daughter.

Evers kept mum, even keeping this nugget from Ellie. If she'd known he intended to use any such scurrilous information to break the partnership agreement, she would have been horrified. *It's surely not necessary to stoop to that*, she would have said, and she would have believed it. El thought she understood the bind he was in, but she didn't. The most important thing she didn't understand was that it was *their* bind—hers and little Patrick's as well as his own. If Speedy went nationwide now, they'd be crushed by the giants within a year. Two at the outside. Evers was dead certain of it, and had the numbers to back it up. All they'd worked for would be washed away, and he had no intention of drowning in the sea of Lennie Wheeler's ambitions. It could not be allowed.

He hadn't opened with *Fuck you, Lennie*. First he tried the reasonable approach, using the latest spreadsheets to lay out his case. Their market share in New England was due to their ability to rent one-way and at hourly rates the big boys couldn't match. Because the area they covered was so compact, they could rebalance their entire inventory within three hours, where the big boys couldn't and had to charge a premium. On September 1, move-in day for the students, Speedy owned Boston. Spread the fleet thin trying to cover the Lower 48 and they'd have the same headaches as U-Haul and Penske—the same lumbering business model they purposely avoided and undersold. Why would they want to be like the other guys when they were killing the other guys? If Wheeler hadn't noticed, Penske was in Chapter 11, Thrifty too.

"Precisely," Wheeler said. "With the big boys on the sidelines, this is the perfect time. We *don't* try to be like them, Dean. We chop the country into regions and do what we already do."

"How does that work in the Northwest?" Evers asked. "Or the Southwest? Or even the Midwest? The country's too big."

"It may not be as profitable at first, but it won't take long. You've seen our competition. Eighteen months—two years tops—and we'll be absolutely killing them."

"We're already overextended, and now you want us to take on more debt."

As they went back and forth, Evers honestly believed in his argument. Even for a publicly owned company, the problems of capitalization and cash flow were insurmountable—a judgment that would prove devastatingly true two decades later, when the downturn hit. But Lennie Wheeler was used to having his way, and nothing Evers said would dissuade him. Wheeler had already talked with several venture capital concerns and printed up a sleek-looking brochure. He planned to take his proposal directly to the shareholders, over Evers's protests, if necessary.

"I don't think you want to do that," Evers said.

"And why's that, Dean?"

He'd tried, really tried, to do this ethically, honorably. And he knew he was right; time would prove it. In business everything was a means to one end—survival. Evers felt it urgently then and still thought it true today. He had to save the company. Hence, the nuclear option.

"I don't think you want to do that because I don't think you'd like what I'd take to the shareholders' meeting. Or should I say, whom?"

Wheeler laughed, a sick little chuckle. He stared at Evers as if he'd pulled a gun. "Whom?"

"We both know whom," Evers said.

Wheeler slowly rubbed a hand up the side of his face. "I was wondering why you walked in here like you'd already won something."

"We're not winning anything. We're avoiding a mistake that would lose us everything. I'm sorry it came to this. If you'd have just listened to me—"

"Fuck you, Dean," Wheeler said. "Don't try to apologize for blackmail. It's bad manners. And since it's just the two of us, why don't you roll those spreadsheets tight—that's the only way you'll get them up that narrow ass of yours—and admit the truth: you're a coward. Always were."

Within a year, Evers bought him out. The split was expensive, and, in retrospect, a better deal than Wheeler deserved. Lennie left New England, then his wife, and finally, in an ER in Palm Springs, this earthly vale of tears. Out of respect, Evers flew west for the funeral, at which, not surprisingly, there were no lifeguard types, and, of the family, only the daughter, who dryly thanked Evers for coming. He didn't say the first thought that had come into his mind: *Sarcasm doesn't become fat girls, dear*. A few years later, after a thorough vetting of the numbers and fueled

by Bain Capital, Speedy actually did go national, using a streamlined version of their old regional plan. That Evers had been right—that it ended with Speedy's lawyers filing the same Chapter 11 briefs as their vanquished rivals—was little vindication. He came out of it with a goodly sum, however, and that was.

The funny thing was that with a minimum of digging—an offhand question or three to Martha, a keen read of her blinking—Wheeler could have bought himself an ironclad insurance policy. When Evers realized this, he gently dropped her, which, because they both had a conscience, was actually a relief. Their fling had run its more than pleasant course, and rather than fire her, he kept her closer, making her his executive assistant at double the salary, working beside her day in, day out until, eventually, she accepted a lavish early retirement package. At her farewell party, he made a speech and gave her a Honda Gold Wing and a peck on the cheek, to raised glasses and warm applause. The affair ended with a slide show featuring Martha on her old Harley Tri-Glide, while George Thorogood sang "Ride On Josephine."

It was a rare moment for Evers, a happy parting. Beyond the silly intrigue, he'd always liked Martha, her brash laugh and the way she hummed to herself as she typed, a pencil tucked behind one ear. What he said in his speech—that she wasn't merely an assistant but a dear and trusted friend—was true. Though he hadn't spoken to her in ages, of all the people he'd worked with, she was the only one he missed. Drowsing now as the Ambien kicked in, he wondered hazily if she was still alive, or if, tomorrow, he'd turn on the game and find her behind home, wearing the sleeveless yellow sundress with the daisies he liked.

He rose at eight—a full hour past his usual time—and stooped to pick the paper from the mat. He checked the sports page and discovered the Rays had the night off. That was all right; there was always CSI. Evers showered, ate a healthy breakfast in which wheat germ played a major role, then sat down to track Young Doctor Young on the computer. When that marvel of the twenty-first century failed (or maybe he just wasn't doing it right, Ellie had always been the computer whiz), he picked up the telephone. According to the morgue desk at the *Shrewsbury Herald-Crier*, the dental bogeyman of Evers's childhood had died in 1978. Amazingly, he'd been only fifty-nine, nearly a decade younger than Evers was now. Evers

pondered the unknowable, was his life cut short by the war, Luckles, dentistry, or all three?

There was nothing remarkable in his obituary, just the usual survived by and funeral home info. Evers had had absolutely nothing to do with the drunk old butcher's demise, just the bad luck to be his victim. Exonerated, that night he raised an extra glass or four to Dr. Young. He ordered in, but it took forever, arriving after he was well in the bag. *CSI* turned out to be one he'd seen before, and all the sitcoms were stupid. Where was Bob Newhart when you needed him? Evers brushed his teeth, took two of Ellie's Ambiens, then stood swaying in front of the bathroom mirror, his eyes bleeding. "Give me a liver long enough," he said, "and I'll move the fucking world."

He slept late again, recovering with instant coffee and oatmeal, and was pleased to see in the paper that the Sox were coming in for a big weekend series. He celebrated the opener with steak, setting the DVR to capture whatever malevolent spirit his past might vomit up. If it happened, this time he'd be ready.

It did, in the seventh inning of a tie game, on a key play at the plate. He would have missed it if he'd gone off to do the dishes, but by then he was poised on the edge of the sofa, totally into the contest and concentrating on every pitch. Longoria doubled to the gap in left center, and Upton tried to score from first. The throw beat him but was wide, up the first baseline. As Sox catcher Kelly Shoppach lunged toward home with a sweep tag, directly behind the screen a scrawny, freckle-faced boy not more than nine rose from his seat.

His haircut was what used to be called a Dutch boy, or, if you were taunting this particular fellow at school, a soup bowl. "Hey, Soup!" they used to hound him in gym, pummeling him, turning every game into Smear the Queer. "Hey, Soupy, Soup, Soupy!"

His name was Lester Embree, and here in the shadowy Trop he wore the same threadbare red-and-blue striped shirt and bleached, patched-at-the-knees Tuffskins he always seemed to have on that spring of 1954. He was white but he lived in the black part of town behind the fairgrounds. He had no father, and the kindest rumor about his mother said she worked in the laundry at St. Joe's hospital. In the middle of the school year he'd come to Shrewsbury from some hick town in Tennessee, a move that seemed foolish, a dunderheaded affront to Evers and his cadre of buddies. They

delighted in imitating his soft drawl, drawing out the halting answers he gave in class into Foghorn Leghorn monologues. "I say, I say, Miss Pritchett, ma'am, I do declayuh I have done done dooty in these heah britches."

On-screen, Upton leapt to his feet, looking back at the sprawled catcher and signaling safe just as the umpire punched the air with a clenched fist. A different camera zoomed out to show Joe Maddon charging from the dugout in high dudgeon. The sellout crowd was going wild.

In the replay—even before Evers paused and ran it back with the clicker—Lester Embree and his doofy bowl cut were visible above the FOX 13 ad recessed into the wall's blue padding, and then, as Upton clearly evaded the tag with a nifty hook slide, the quiet boy Evers and his friends had witnessed being pulled wrinkled and fingerless from Marsden's Pond rose and pointed one fish-nibbled stub not at the play developing right in front of him, but, as if he could see into the air-conditioned, dimly lit condo, directly at Evers. His lips were moving, and it didn't look like he was saying *Kill the ump*.

"Come on," Evers scoffed, as if at the bad call. "Jesus, I was a kid."

The TV returned to live action—very lively, in fact. Joe Maddon and the home plate ump stood toe to toe and nose to nose. Both were jawing away, and you didn't have to be a fortune-teller to know that Maddon would soon be following the game from the clubhouse. Evers had no interest in watching the Rays' manager get the hook. He used his remote to run the picture back to where Lester Embree had come into view.

Maybe he won't be there, Evers thought. Maybe you can't DVR ghosts any more than you can see vampires in a mirror.

Only Lester Embree was right there in the stands—in the expensive seats, no less—and Evers suddenly remembered the day at Fairlawn Grammar when old Soupy had been waiting at Evers's locker. Just seeing him there had made Evers want to haul off and paste him one. The little fucker was trespassing, after all. *They'll stop if you tell 'em to*, Soupy had said in that crackerbarrel drawl of his. *Even Koz will stop.*

He'd been talking about Chuckie Kazmierski, only no one called him Chuckie, not even now. Evers could attest to that, because Kaz was the only friend from his childhood who was still a friend. He lived in Punta Gorda, and sometimes they got together for a round of golf. Just two happy retirees, one divorced, one a widower. They reminisced a lot—really, what

else were old men good for?—but it had been years since they talked about Soupy Embree. Evers had to wonder now just why that was. Shame? Guilt? Maybe on his part, but probably not on Kaz's. As the youngest of six brothers and the runt of their scruffy pack, Kaz had had to fight for every inch of respect. He'd earned his spot as top dog the hard way, with knuckles and blood, and he took Lester Embree's helplessness as a personal insult. No one had ever given him a break, and now this whingeing hillbilly was asking for a free pass? "Nothing's free," Kaz used to say, shaking his head as if it was a sad truth. "Somehow, some way, somebody got to pay."

Probably Kaz doesn't even remember, Evers thought. Neither did I, till tonight. Tonight he was having total recall. Mostly what he remembered was the kid's pleading eyes that day by his locker. Big and blue and soft. And that wheedling, compone voice, begging him, like it was really in his power to do it.

You're the one Kaz and the rest of them listen to. Gimme a break, won't you? Ah'll give you money. Two bucks a week, that's mah whole allowance. All Ah want's to get along.

Little as he liked to, Evers could remember his answer, delivered in a jeering mockery of the boy's accent: *If'n all you want's to git along, you git along rah! out of heah, Soupy. Ah don't want yoa! money, hit's prob'ly crawlin wit' fag germs.*

A loyal lieutenant (not the general, as Lester Embree had assumed), Evers immediately brought the matter to Kaz, embellishing the scene further, laughing at his own drawl. Later, in the shadow of the flagpole, he egged Kaz on from the nervous circle surrounding the fight. Technically, it wasn't a fight at all, because Soupy never defended himself. He folded at Kaz's first blow, curling into a ball on the ground while Kaz slugged and kicked him at will. And then, as if he'd tired, Kaz straddled him, grabbed his wrists, and pinned his arms back above his head. Soupy was weeping, his split lip blowing bloody bubbles. In the tussle, his red-and-blue striped shirt had ripped, the fishbelly skin of his chest showing through a fist-size hole. He didn't resist as Kaz let go of his wrists, took hold of the tear in his shirt with both hands, and ripped it apart. The collar wouldn't give, and Kaz rugged it off over Soupy's ears in three hard jerks, then stood and twirled the shreds over his head like a lasso before flinging it down on Soupy and walking away. What astonished Evers, besides the inner wildness Kaz had tapped and the style with which he'd destroyed his opponent, was how fast

it all happened. In total, it had taken maybe two minutes. The teachers still hadn't even made it outside.

When the kid disappeared a week later, Evers and his pals thought he must have run away. Soupy's mother thought differently. He liked to go on wildlife walks, she said. He was a dreamy boy, he might have gotten lost. There was a massive search of the nearby woods, including baying teams of bloodhounds brought from Boston. As Boy Scouts, Evers and his friends were in on it. They heard the commotion at the dam end of Marsden's Pond and came running. Later, when they saw the eyeless thing that rose dripping from the spillway, they would all wish they hadn't.

And now, thanks to God only knew what agency, here was Lester Embree at Tropicana Field, standing with the other fans watching the play at the plate. His fingers were mostly gone, but he still seemed to have his thumbs. His eyes and nose, too. Well, most of his nose. Lester was looking through the television screen at Dean Evers, just like Miss Nancy looking through her magic mirror on the old *Romper Room* show. "Romper, stomper, bomper, boo," Miss Nancy liked to chant in the way-back-when. "My magic mirror can see you."

Lester's pointing finger-stub. Lester's moving mouth. Saying what? Evers only had to watch it twice to be sure: *You murdered me*.

"Not true!" he yelled at the boy in the red-and-blue striped shirt. "Not true! You fell in Marsden's! You fell in the pond! You fell in the pond and it was your own goddamned fault!"

He turned off the TV and went to bed. He lay there awhile thrumming like a wire, then got up and took two Amblens, washing them down with a healthy knock of scotch. The pill-and-booze combo killed the thrumming, at least, but he still lay wakeful, staring into the dark with eyes that felt as large and smooth as brass doorknobs. At three he turned the clock-radio around to face the wall. At five, as the first traces of dawn backlit the drapes, a comforting thought came to him. He wished he could share this comforting thought with Soupy Embree, but since he couldn't, he did the next best thing and spoke it aloud.

"If it were possible to go back in a time machine and change the stupid things some of us did in grammar school and junior high, Soups old buddy, that gadget would be booked up right into the twenty-third century."

Exactamundo. You couldn't blame kids. Grown-ups knew better, but kids were stupid by nature. Sometimes malevolent by nature too. He seemed to

remember something about a girl in New Zealand who'd bludgeoned her best friend's mother to death with a brick. She'd hit the poor woman fifty times or more with that old brick, and when the girl was found guilty she went to jail for . . . what? Seven years? Five? Less? When she got out, she went to England and became an airline stewardess. Later she became a very popular mystery novelist. Who'd told him that story? Ellie, of course. El had been a great reader of mysteries, always trying—and often succeeding—in guessing whodunit.

"Soupy," he told his lightening bedroom, "you can't blame me. I plead diminished capacity." That actually made him smile.

As if it had just been waiting for this conclusion, another comforting thought arose. *I don't need to watch the game tonight. Nothing's forcing me to.*

That was finally enough to send him off. He woke shortly after noon, the first time he'd slept so late since college. In the kitchen he briefly considered the oatmeal, then fried himself three eggs in butter. He would have tossed in some bacon, if he'd had any. He did the next-best thing, adding it to the grocery list stuck to the fridge with a cucumber magnet.

"No game tonight for me," he told the empty condo. "Ah b'leeve Ah mah! . . ."

He heard what his voice was doing and stopped, bewildered. It came to him that he might not be suffering from dementia or early-onset Alzheimer's; he might be having your ordinary everyday garden-variety nervous breakdown. That seemed a perfectly reasonable explanation for recent events, but knowledge was power. If you saw what was happening, you could stop it, right?

"I believe I might go out to a movie," he said in his own voice. Quietly Reasonably. "That's all I meant to say."

In the end, he decided against a film. Although there were twenty screens in the immediate area, he could find nothing he wanted to watch on a single one of them. He went to the Publix instead, where he picked up a basketful of goodies (including a pound of the good thick-sliced pepper bacon Ellie loved). He started for the ten-items-or-less checkout lane, saw the girl at the register was wearing a Rays shirt with Matt Joyce's number 20 on the back, and diverted to one of the other lanes instead. That took longer, but he told himself he didn't mind. He also told himself he wasn't thinking about how someone would be singing the national anthem at the Trop right now. He'd

picked up the new Harlan Coben in paperback, a little literary bacon to go with the literal variety. He'd read it tonight. Baseball couldn't match up to Coben's patented terror-in-the-burbs, not even when it was Jon Lester matched up against Matt Moore. How had he ever become interested in such a slow, boring sport to begin with?

He put away his groceries and settled onto the sofa. The Coben was terrific, and he got into it right away. Evers was so immersed that he didn't realize he'd picked up the TV remote, but when he got to the end of chapter six and decided to break for a small piece of Pepperidge Farm lemon cake, the gadget was right there in his hand.

Won't hurt to check the score, he thought. Just a quick peek, and off it goes.

The Rays were up one to nothing in the eighth, and Dewayne Staats was so excited he was burbling. "Don't want to talk about what's going on with Matt Moore tonight, folks—I'm old-school—but let's just say that the bases have been devoid of Crimson Hose."

No-hitter, Evers thought. Moore's pitching a damn no-hitter and I've been missing it.

Close-up on Moore. He was sweating, even in the Trop's constant 72 degrees. He went into his motion, the picture changed to the home plate shot, and there in the third row was Dean Evers's dead wife, wearing the same tennis whites she'd had on the day of her first stroke. He would have recognized that blue piping anywhere.

Ellie was deeply tanned, as she always was by this time of summer, and as was the case more often than not at the ballpark, she was ignoring the game entirely, poking at her iPhone instead. For an unfocused moment, Evers wondered who she was texting—someone here, or someone in the afterlife?—when, in his pocket, his cell phone buzzed.

She raised the phone to her ear and gave him a little wave.

Pick up, she mouthed, and pointed to her phone.

Evers shook his head no slowly.

His phone vibrated again, like a mild shock applied to his thigh.

"No," he said to the TV, and thought, logically: *She can just leave a message.*

Ellie shook her phone at him.

"This is wrong," he said. Because Ellie wasn't like Soupy Embree or Lennie Wheeler or Young Dr. Young. She loved him—of that Evers was

sure—and he loved her. Forty-six years meant something, especially nowadays.

He searched her face. She seemed to be smiling, and while he didn't have a speech prepared, he guessed he did want to tell her how much he missed her, and what his days were like, and how he wished he was closer to Pat and Sue and the grandkids, because, really, there was no one else he could talk to.

He dug the phone from his pocket. Though he'd deactivated her account months ago, the number that came up was hers.

On TV, Moore was pacing behind the mound, juggling the rosin bag on the back of his pitching hand.

And then there she was, right behind David Ortiz, holding up her phone.

He pressed TALK.

"Hello?" he said.

"Finally," she said "Why didn't you pick up?"

"I don't know. It's kind of weird, don't you think?"

"What's weird?"

"I don't know. You not being here and all."

"Dead, you mean. Me being dead."

"That."

"So you don't want to talk to me because I'm dead."

"No," he said "I always want to talk to you " He smiled—at least, he thought he was smiling. He'd have to check the mirror to be sure, because his face felt frozen. "You're wanted, sweetheart, dead or alive."

"You're such a liar. That's one thing I always hated about you. And fucking Martha, of course. I wasn't a big fan of that either."

What could he say to that? Nothing. So he sat silent.

"Did you think I didn't know?" she said. "That's another thing I hated about you, thinking I didn't know what was going on. It was so obvious. A couple of times you came home still stinking of her perfume. Juicy Couture. Not the most subtle of scents. But then, you were never the most subtle guy, Dean."

"I miss you, El."

"Okay, yes, I miss you too. That's not the point."

"I love you."

"Stop trying to press my buttons, all right? I need to do this. I didn't say anything before because I needed to keep everything together and make

everything work. That's who I am. Or was, anyway. And I did. But you hurt me. You cut me."

"I'm sorry—"

"Please, Dean. I only have a couple minutes left, so for once in your life shut up and listen. You hurt me, and it wasn't just with Martha. And although I'm pretty sure Martha was the only one you slept with—"

That stung. "Of course she wa—"

"—don't expect any brownie points for that. You didn't have time to cheat on me with anyone outside the company because you were always there. Even when you were here you were there. I understood that, and maybe that was my fault for not sticking up for myself, but the one it really wasn't fair to was Patrick. You wonder why you never see him, it's because you were never there for him. You were always off in Denver or Seattle at some sales meeting or something. Selfishness is learned behavior, you know."

This criticism Evers had heard many times before, in many forms, and his attention waned. Moore had gone 3–2 on Papi. Devold, Staats had said. Was Matt Moore really throwing a perfect game?

"You were always too worried about what you were doing, and not enough about the rest of us. You thought bringing home the bacon was enough."

I did, he almost told her. I did bring home the bacon. Just tonight.

"Dean? Are you hearing me? Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"Yes," Evers said, just as the pitch from Moore caught the outside corner and the ump rang up Ortiz. "Yes!"

"I know that yes! God damn you, are you watching the stupid game?"

"Of course I'm watching the game." Though now it was a truck commercial. A grinning man—one who undoubtedly knew how to get things done—was driving through mud at a suicidal speed.

"I don't know why I called. You're hopeless."

"I'm not," Evers said. "I miss you."

"Jesus, why do I even bother? Forget it. Good-bye."

"Don't!" he said.

"I tried to be nice—that's the story of my life. I tried to be nice and look where it got me. People like you eat nice. Good-bye, Dean."

"I love you," he repeated, but she was gone, and when the game came back on, the woman with the sparkly top was in Ellie's seat. The woman

with the sparkly top was a Tropicana Field regular. Sometimes the top was blue and sometimes it was green, but it was always sparkly. Probably so the folks at home could pick her out. As if she'd caught the thought, she waved. Evers waved back. "Yeah, bitch, I see you. You're on TV, bitch, good fucking job."

He got up and poured himself a scotch.

In the ninth Ellsbury snuck a seeing-eye single through the right side, and the crowd rose and applauded Moore for his effort. Evers turned the game off and sat before the dark screen, mulling what Ellie had said.

Unlike Soupy Embree's accusation, Ellie's was true. Mostly true, he amended, then changed it to at least partly true. She knew him better than anyone in the world—this world or any other—but she'd never been willing to give him the credit he deserved. He was, after all, the one who'd put groceries in the refrigerator all those years, some pretty high-grade bacon. He was also the one who'd paid for the refrigerator—a top-of-the-line Sub-Zero, thank you very much. He'd paid for her Audi. And her tennis club dues. And her massage therapist. And all the stuff she bought from the catalogs. And hey, let's not forget Patrick's college tuition! Evers had had to put together a jackleg combination of scholarships, loan packages, and shit summer jobs to get through school, but Patrick had gotten a full boat from his old man. The old man he was too busy to call these days.

She comes back from the dead, and why? To complain. And to do it on the goddamn iPhone I paid for.

He thought of an old saying and wished he'd quoted it to Ellie while he still had the chance. "Money can't buy happiness, but it allows one to endure unhappiness in relative comfort."

That might have shut her up.

The more he considered their life together—and there was nothing like talking to your dead spouse while you looked at her in a club seat to make you consider such things—the more he thought that while he hadn't been perfect, he'd still been all right. He did love her and Patrick, and had always tried to be kind to them. He'd worked hard to give them everything he never had, thinking he was doing the right thing. If it wasn't enough, there was nothing he could do about it now. As for the thing with Martha . . . some kinds of fucking were meaningless. Men understood that—Koz certainly would have understood it—but women did not.

In bed, dropping into a blissful oblivion that was three parts Ambien and two parts scotch, it came to him that Ellie's rant was strangely freeing. Who else could they (whoever *they* were) send to bedevil him? Who could make him feel any worse? His mother? His father? He'd loved them, but not as he'd loved Ellie. Miss Pritchett? His uncle Elmer who used to tickle him till he wet his pants?

Snuggling deeper into the covers, Evers actually snickered at that. No, the worst had happened. And although there would be another great match-up tomorrow night at the Trop—Josh Beckett squaring off against James Shields—he didn't have to watch. His last thought was that from now on, he'd have more time to read. Lee Child, maybe. He'd been meaning to get to those Lee Child books.

But first he had the Harlan Coben to finish. He spent the afternoon lost in the green, pitiless suburbs. As the sun went down on another St. Petersburg Sunday, he was into the last fifty pages or so, and racing along. That was when his phone buzzed. He picked it up gingerly—the way a man might pick up a loaded mousetrap—and looked at the readout. What he saw there was a relief. The call was from Kaz, and unless his old pal had suffered a fatal heart attack (not entirely out of the question; he was a good thirty pounds overweight), he was calling from Punta Gorda rather than the afterlife.

Still, Evers was cautious, given recent events, he had every reason to be. "Kaz, is that you?"

"Who the hell else would it be?" Kaz boomed. Evers winced and held the phone away from his ear. "Barack fucking Obama?"

Evers laughed feebly. "No, I just—"

"Fuckin' Dino Martino! You suck, buddy! Front-row seats, and you didn't even call me?"

From far away, Evers heard himself say "I only had one ticket." He looked at his watch. Twenty past eight. It should have been the second inning by now—unless the Rays and Red Sox were the 8:00 Sunday-night game on ESPN.

He reached for the remote.

Kaz, meanwhile, was laughing. The way he'd laughed that day in the schoolyard. It had been higher-pitched then, but otherwise it was just the same. He was just the same. It was a depressing thought. "Yeah, yeah, I'm just yankin' your ballsack. How's the view from there?"

"Great," Evers said, pushing the power button on the remote. Fox 13 was showing some old movie with Bruce Willis blowing things up. He punched 29 and ESPN came on. Shields was dealing to Dustin Pedroia, second in the Sox lineup. The game had just started.

I'm doomed to baseball, Evers thought.

"Dino? Earth to Dino Martino! You still there?"

"I'm here," he said, and turned up the volume. Pedroia flailed and missed. The crowd roared; those imitating cowbells the Rays fans favored clanged with maniacal fervor. "Pedie just struck out."

"No shit. I ain't blind, Stevie Wonder. The Rays Rooters are pumped up, huh?"

"Totally pumped," Evers said hollowly. "Great night for a ball game."

Now Adrian Gonzalez was stepping in. And there, sitting in the first row right behind the screen, doing a fair impersonation of a craggy old snowbird playing out his golden years in the Sunshine State, was Dean Patrick Evers.

He was wearing a ridiculous foam finger, and although he couldn't read it, not even in HD, he knew what it said: RAYS ARE #1. Evers at home stared at Evers behind home with the phone against his ear. Evers at the park stared back, holding the selfsame phone in the hand that wasn't wearing the foam finger. With a sense of outrage that not even his stunned amazement could completely smother, he saw that Ballpark Evers was wearing a Rays jersey. *Never,* he thought. *Those are traitor colors.*

"There you are!" Kaz shouted exultantly. "Shake me a wave, buddy!"

Evers at the ballpark raised the foam finger and waved it solemnly, like an oversize windshield wiper. Evers at home, on autopilot, did the same with his free hand.

"Love the shirt, Dino," Kaz said. "Seeing you in Rays colors is like seeing Doris Day topless." He snickered.

"I had to wear it," Evers said. "The guy who gave me the ticket insisted. Listen, I've gotta go. Want to grab a beer and a d—ohmygod, there it goes!"

Conzo had launched a long drive, high and deep.

"Drink one for me!" Kaz shouted.

On Evers's expensive TV, Gonzalez was lumbering around the bases. As he watched, Evers suddenly understood what he had to do. There was only one way to put an end to this cosmic joke. On a Sunday night, downtown St. Pete would be deserted. If he took a taxi, he could be at the Trop by the end of the second inning. Maybe even sooner.

"Kaz?"

"Yeah, buddy?"

"We should either have been nicer to Lester Embree, or left him alone."

He pushed END before Kaz could reply. He turned off the TV. Then he went into his bedroom, rooted through the folded shirts in his bureau, and found his beloved Curt Schilling jersey, the one with the bloody sock on the front and WHY NOT US? on the back. Schilling had been The Man, afraid of nothing. When the Evers in the Rays shirt saw him in this one, he'd fade away like the bad dream he was and all of this would end.

Evers yanked the shirt on and called a cab. There was one nearby that had just dropped off a fare, and the streets were as deserted as Evers had expected. The cabbie had the game on the radio. The Sox were still batting in the top half of the second when he pulled up to the main gate.

"You'll have to settle for nosebleeds," the cabbie said. "Sox-Rays, that's a hot ticket."

"I've got one right behind home plate," Evers said. "Stop somewhere they've got the game on, you might see me. Look for the shirt with the bloody sock on it."

"I heard that fuckin' hoser's video game business went broke," the cabbie said as Evers handed him a ten. He looked, saw Evers still sitting in the backseat with the door open, and reluctantly made change. From it, Evers handed him a single crumpled simoleon.

"Guy with a front-row seat should be able to do better'n that for a tip," the cabbie grumbled.

"Guy with half a brain in his head should keep his mouth shut about the Big Schill," Evers said. "If he wants a better tip, that is." He slipped out, slammed the door and headed for the entrance.

"*Fuck you, Boston!*" the cabbie shouted.

Without turning around, Evers holsted a middle finger—real, not foam.

The concourse with its palm trees lit like Christmas in Hawaii was all but empty, the sound of the crowd inside the stadium a hollow surf-boom. It was a sellout, the LED signs above the shuttered ticket windows bragged. There was only one window still open, all the way down at the end, the WILL CALL.

Yes, Evers thought, because they *will* call, won't they? He headed for it like a man on rails.

"Help you, sir?" the pretty ticket agent asked, and was that Julcy Couture she was wearing? Surely not. He remembered Martha saying, *It's my slut perfume. I only wear it for you.* She'd been willing to do things Ellie wouldn't dream of, things he remembered at all the wrong times.

"Help you, sir?"

"Sorry," Evers said. "Had a little senior moment there."

She smiled dutifully.

"Do you happen to have a ticket for Evers? Dean Evers?"

There was no hesitation, no thumbing through a whole box of envelopes, because there was only one left. It had his name on it. She slid it through the gap in the glass. "Enjoy the game."

"We'll see," Evers said.

He made for Gate A, opening the envelope and taking out the ticket. A piece of paper was clipped to it, just four words below the Rays logo: **COMPLIMENTS OF THE MANAGEMENT** He strode briskly up the ramp and handed the ticket to a crusty usher who was standing there and watching as Elliot Johnson dug in against Josh Beckett. At the very least, the geezer was a good half century older than his employers. Like so many of his kind, he was in no hurry. It was one reason Evers no longer drove.

"Nice seat," the usher said, raising his eyebrows. "Just about the best in the house. And you show up late." He gave a disapproving head shake.

"I would have been here sooner," Evers said, "but my wife died."

The usher froze in the act of turning away, Evers's ticket in hand.

"Gotcha," Evers said, smiling and pointing a playful finger-gun. "That one never fails."

The usher didn't look amused. "Follow me, sir."

Down and down the steep steps they went. The usher was in worse shape than Evers, all wattle and liver spots, and by the time they reached the front row, Johnson was headed back to the dugout, a strikeout victim. Evers's seat was the only empty one—or not quite empty. Leaning against the back was a large blue foam finger that blasphemed **RAYS ARE #1**.

My seat, Evers thought, and as he picked the offending finger up and sat down he saw, with only the slightest surprise, that he was no longer wearing his treasured Schilling jersey. Somewhere between the cab and this ridiculous, padded Captain Kirk perch, it had been replaced by a turquoise Rays shirt. And although he couldn't see the back, he knew what it said. **MATT YOUNG**.

"Young Matt Young," he said, a crack that his neighbors—neither of whom he recognized—pointedly ignored. He craned around, searching the section for Ellie and Soupy Embree and Lennie Wheeler, but it was just a mix of anonymous Rays and Sox fans. He didn't even see the sparkly-top lady.

Between pitches, as he was twisted around trying to see behind him, the guy on his right tapped Evers's arm and pointed to the JumboTron just in time for him to catch a grotesquely magnified version of himself turning around.

"You missed yourself," the guy said.

"That's all right," Evers said. "I've been on TV enough lately."

Before Beckett could decide between his fastball and his slider, Evers's phone buzzed in his pocket.

Can't even watch the game in peace.

"Yello," he said.

"Who'm I talkin' to?" The voice of Chuckie Kazmierski was high and truculent, his I'm-ready-to-fight voice. Evers knew it well, had heard it often over the long arc of years stretching between Fairlawn Grammar and this seat at Tropicana Field, where the light was always dingy and the stars were never seen. "That you, Dino?"

"Who else? Bruce Willis?" Beckett missed low and away. The crowd rang their idiotic cowbells.

"Dino Martino, right?"

Jesus, Evers thought, next he'll be saying who's on first and I'll be saying what's on second

"Yes, Kaz, the artist formerly known as Dean Patrick Evers. We are paste together in the second grade, remember? Probably too much."

"It *is* you!" Kaz shouted, making Evers jerk the phone away from his ear. "I told that cop he was full of shit! Detective Kelly, my ass."

"What in hell are you talking about?"

"Some ass-knot pretending to be a cop's what I'm talkin' about. I knew it couldn't be real, he sounded too fuckin' official."

"Huh," Evers said. "An official official, imagine that."

"Guy tells me you're dead, so I go, if he's dead, how come I just talked to him on the phone? And the cop—the so-called cop—he goes, I think you're mistaken, sir. You must have talked to someone else. And I go, how come I just now saw him on TV at the Rays game? And this so-called cop goes,

either you saw someone who looked like him or someone who looks like him is dead in his apartment. You believe this shit?"

Beckett bounced one off the plate. He was all over the place. The crowd was loving it. "If it wasn't a prank, I guess someone made a big mistake."

"Ya *think*?" Kaz gave his trademark laugh, low and raspy. "Especially since I'm talkin' to you right fuckin' now."

"You called to make sure I was still alive, huh?"

"Yeah." Now that he was settling down, Kaz seemed puzzled by this.

"Tell me something—if I'd turned out to be dead after all, would you have left a voice mail?"

"What? Jesus, I don't know." Kaz seemed more puzzled than ever, but that was nothing new. He'd always been puzzled. By events, by other people, probably by his own beating heart. Evers supposed that was part of why he'd so often been angry. Even when he wasn't angry, he was *ready* to be angry.

I'm speaking of him in the past tense, Evers realized.

"The guy I talked to said they found you at your place. Said you'd been dead for a while too."

The guy next to Evers nudged him again. "Lookin' good, buddy," he said.

On the JumboTron, shocking in its homely familiarity, was Evers's darkened bedroom. In the middle of the bed he'd shared with Ellie, the pillowtop king that was now too big for him, Evers lay still and pale, his eyes half-lidded, his lips purplish, his mouth a stiff rictus. Foam had dried like old spiderwebs on his chin.

When Evers turned to his seatmate, wanting to confirm what he was seeing, the seat beside him—the row, the section, the whole Tropicana Dome—was empty. And yet the players kept playing.

"They said you killed yourself."

"I didn't kill myself," Evers replied, and thought. *That damn expired Ambien. And maybe putting it with the scotch wasn't such a great idea. How long has it been? Since Friday night?*

"I know, it didn't sound like you."

"So, are you watching the game?"

"I turned it off. Fuckin' cop—that fuckin' ass-knot—upset me."

"Turn it on again," Evers said.

"Okay," Kaz said. "Lemme grab the remote."

"You know, we should have been nicer to Lester Embree."

"Water over the dam, old buddy. Or under the bridge. Or whatever the fuck it is."

"Maybe not. From now on, don't be so angry. Try to be nicer to people. Try to be nicer to everyone. Do that for me, will you, Kaz?"

"What the Christ is wrong with you? You sound like a fuckin' Hallmark card on Mother's Day."

"I suppose I do," Evers said. He found this a very sad idea, somehow. On the mound, Beckett was peering in for the sign.

"Hey, Dino! There you are! You sure don't look dead." Kaz gave out his old rusty cackle.

"I don't feel it."

"I was scared there for a minute," Kaz said. "Fuckin' crank yanker. Wonder how he got my number."

"Dunno," Evers said, surveying the empty park. Though of course he knew. After Ellie died, of the nine million people in Tampa-St. Pete, Kaz was the only person he could put down as an emergency contact. And that idea was sadder still.

"All right, buddy, I'll let you get back to the game. Maybe golf next week if it doesn't rain."

"We'll see," Evers said. "Stay cool, Kazzie, and—"

Kaz joined him then, and they chanted the last line together, as they had many, many times before: "*Don't let the bastards get you down!*"

That was it, it was over. He sensed things moving again, a flurry behind him, at the periphery of his vision. He looked around, phone in hand, and saw the spotted usher creakily leading Uncle Elmer and Aunt June down the stairs, and several girls he'd dated in high school, including the one who'd been sort of semiconscious—or maybe *unconscious* would be closer to the truth—when he'd had her. Behind them came Miss Pritchett with her hair down for once, and Mrs. Carlisle from the drugstore, and the Jansens, the elderly neighbors whose deposit bottles he'd stolen off their back porch. From the other side, as if it were a company outing, a second, equally ancient usher was filling in the rows at the top of the section with former Speedy employees, a number of them in their blue uniforms. He recognized Don Blanton, who'd been questioned during a child pornography investigation in the mid-nineties and had hung himself in his Malden garage. Evers remembered how shocked he'd been, both by the idea of

someone he knew possibly being involved in kiddie porn and by Don's final action. He'd always liked the man, and hadn't wanted to let him go, but with that kind of accusation hanging over his head, what else could he do? The reputation of a company's employees was part of its bottom line.

He still had some battery left. What the hell, he thought. It was a big game. They were probably watching on the Cape.

"Hey, Dad," Pat answered.

"You watching the game?"

"The kids are. The grown-ups are playing cards."

Next to the first usher stood Lennie Wheeler's daughter, still in her black crepe and veil. She pointed like a dark spectre at Evers. She'd lost all her baby fat, and Evers wondered if that had happened before she died, or after.

"Go look at the game, son."

"Hang on," Pat said, followed by the screek of a chair. "Okay, I'm watching."

"Right behind home, in the front row."

"What am I looking at?"

Evers stood up behind the netting and waved his blue foam finger. "Do you see me?"

"No, where are you?"

Young Dr. Young hobbled down the steep stairs on his bad leg, using the seat backs to steady himself. On his smock, like a medal, was a coffee-colored splotch of dried blood.

"Do you see me now?" Evers took the phone from his ear and waved both arms over his head as if he was flagging a train. The grotesque finger nodded back and forth.

"No."

So, no.

Which was fine. Which was actually better.

"Be good, Patty," Evers said. "I love you."

He hit END as, all around the park, the sections were filling in. He couldn't see who'd come to spend eternity with him in peanut heaven or the far reaches of the outfield, but the premium seats were going fast. Here came the ushers with the shambling, rag-clad remnants of Soupy Embree, and then his mother, haggard after a double shift, and Lennie Wheeler in his pinstripe funeral suit and Grandfather Lincoln with his cane and Martha and Ellie and his mother and father and all the people he'd ever wronged in his

life. As they filed into his row from both sides, he stuck his phone in his pocket and took his seat again, pulling off the foam finger as he did. He propped it on the now unoccupied seat to his left. Saving it for Kaz. Because he was sure Kaz would be joining them at some point, after seeing him on TV, and calling him. If Evers had learned anything about how this worked, it was that the two of them weren't done talking just yet.

A cheer erupted, and the rattle of cowbells. The Rays were still hitting. Down the right field line, though it was far too early, some loudmouth was exhorting the crowd to start the wave. As always when distracted from the action, Evers checked the scoreboard to catch up. It was only the third and Beckett had already thrown sixty pitches. The way things were looking, it was going to be a long game.

Turn the page for a preview of Stephen King and
Peter Straub's

Black House

Coming soon in hardcover, paperback, and ebook
from Scribner and Pocket Books

ONE
WELCOME TO COULEE COUNTY

1

Right here and now, as an old friend used to say, we are in the fluid present, where clear-sightedness never guarantees perfect vision. Here, about two hundred feet, the height of a gliding eagle, above Wisconsin's far western edge, where the vagaries of the Mississippi River declare a natural border. Now, an early Friday morning in mid-July a few years into both a new century and a new millennium, their wayward courses so hidden that a blind man has a better chance of seeing what lies ahead than you or I. Right here and now, the hour is just past six a.m. and the sun stands low in the cloudless eastern sky, a fat, confident yellow-white ball advancing as ever for the first time toward the future and leaving in its wake the steadily accumulating past, which darkens as it recedes, making blind men of us all.

Below, the early sun touches the river's wide, soft ripples with molten highlights. Sunlight glints from the tracks of the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad running between the riverbank and the backs of the shabby two-story houses along County Road Oo, known as Nailhouse Row, the lowest point of the comfortable-looking little town extending uphill and eastward beneath us. At this moment in the Coulee Country, life seems to be holding its breath. The motionless air around us carries such remarkable puny and sweetness that you might imagine a man could smell a radish pulled out of the ground a mile away.

Moving toward the sun, we glide away from the river and over the shining tracks, the backyards and roofs of Nailhouse Row, then a line of Harley-Davidson motorcycles tilted on their kickstands. These unprepossessing little houses were built, early in the century recently vanished, for the metal pourers, mold makers, and crate men employed by the Pederson Nail factory. On the grounds that working stiffs would be unlikely to complain about the flaws in their subsidized accommodations, they were constructed as cheaply as possible (Pederson Nail, which had suffered multiple hemorrhages during the fifties, finally bled to death in 1963.) The waiting Harleys suggest that the factory hands have been replaced by a motorcycle gang. The uniformly ferocious appearance of the Harleys' owners, wild-

haired, bushy-bearded, swag-bellied men sporting earrings, black leather jackets, and less than the full complement of teeth, would seem to support this assumption. Like most assumptions, this one embodies an uneasy half-truth.

The current residents of Nailhouse Row, whom suspicious locals dubbed the Thunder Five soon after they took over the houses along the river, cannot so easily be categorized. They have skilled jobs in the Kingsland Brewing Company, located just out of town to the south and one block east of the Mississippi. If we look to our right, we can see "the world's largest six-pack," storage tanks painted over with gigantic Kingsland Old-Time Lager labels. The men who live on Nailhouse Row met one another on the Urbana-Champaign campus of the University of Illinois, where all but one were undergraduates majoring in English or philosophy. (The exception was a resident in surgery at the UI-UC university hospital.) They get an ironic pleasure from being called the Thunder Five: the name strikes them as sweetly cartoonish. What they call themselves is "the Hegelian Scum." These gentlemen form an interesting crew, and we will make their acquaintance later on. For now, we have time only to note the hand-painted posters taped to the fronts of several houses, two lamp poles, and a couple of abandoned buildings. The posters say: FINGERMAN, YOU BETTER PLAY TO YOUR STRENGTH. GOD WE DON'T CATCH YOU FIRST! REMEMBER AMY!

From Nailhouse Row, Chase Street runs steeply uphill between listing buildings with worn, unpainted facades the color of fog: the old Nelson Hotel, where a few impoverished residents lie sleeping, a blank-faced tavern, a tired shoe store displaying Red Wing workboots behind its filmy picture window, a few other dim buildings that bear no indication of their function and seem oddly dreamlike and vaporous. These structures have the air of failed resurrections, of having been rescued from the dark westward territory although they were still dead. In a way, that is precisely what happened to them. An ocher horizontal stripe, ten feet above the sidewalk on the facade of the Nelson Hotel and two feet from the rising ground on the opposed, ashen faces of the last two buildings, represents the high-water mark left behind by the flood of 1965, when the Mississippi rolled over its banks, drowned the railroad tracks and Nailhouse Row, and mounted nearly to the top of Chase Street.

Where Chase rises above the flood line and levels out, it widens and undergoes a transformation into the main street of French Landing, the town beneath us. The Agincourt Theater, the Taproom Bar & Grille, the First Farmer State Bank, the Samuel Stutz Photography Studio (which does a steady business in graduation photos, wedding pictures, and children's portraits) and shops, not the ghostly relics of shops, line its blunt sidewalks. Benton's Rexall drugstore, Reliable Hardware, Saturday Night Video, Regal Clothing, Schmitt's Allsorts Emponum, stores selling electronic equipment, magazines and greeting cards, toys, and athletic clothing featuring the logos of the Brewers, the Twins, the Packers, the Vikings, and the University of Wisconsin. After a few blocks, the name of the street changes to Lyall Road, and the buildings separate and shrink into one-story wooden structures fronted with signs advertising insurance offices and travel agencies, after that, the street becomes a highway that glides eastward past a 7-Eleven, the Reinhold T. Grauerhammer VFW Hall, a big farm-implement dealership known locally as Goltz's, and into a landscape of flat, unbroken fields. If we rise another hundred feet into the immaculate air and scan what lies beneath and ahead, we see kettle moraines, coulees, blunted hills furry with pines, loam-rich valleys invisible from ground level until you have come upon them, meandering rivers, miles-long patchwork fields, and little towns—one of them, Centralla, no more than a scattering of buildings around the intersection of two narrow highways, 35 and 93.

Directly below us, French Landing looks as though it had been evacuated in the middle of the night. No one moves along the sidewalks or bends to insert a key into one of the locks of the shop fronts along Chase Street. The angled spaces before the shops are empty of the cars and pickup trucks that will begin to appear, first by ones and twos, then in a mannerly little stream, an hour or two later. No lights burn behind the windows in the commercial buildings or the unpretentious houses lining the surrounding streets. A block north of Chase on Sumner Street, four matching red-brick buildings of two stories each house, in west-east order, the French Landing Public Library; the offices of Patrick J. Skarda, M.D., the local general practitioner, and Bell & Holland, a two-man law firm now run by Garland Bell and Julius Holland, the sons of its founders, the Heartfield & Son Funeral Home, now owned by a vast, funereal empire centered in St. Louis, and the French Landing Post Office.

Separated from these by a wide driveway into a good-sized parking lot at the rear, the building at the end of the block, where Sumner intersects with Third Street, is also of red brick and two stories high but longer than its immediate neighbors. Unpainted iron bars block the rear second-floor windows, and two of the four vehicles in the parking lot are patrol cars with light bars across their tops and the letters *PD* on their sides. The presence of police cars and barred windows seems incongruous in this rural fastness—what sort of crime can happen here? Nothing serious, surely, surely nothing worse than a little shoplifting, drunken driving, and an occasional bar fight.

As if in testimony to the peacefulness and regularity of small-town life, a red van with the words *LA REVUE KIBALIS* on its side panels drifts slowly down Third Street, pausing at nearly all of the mailbox stands for its driver to insert copies of the day's newspaper, wrapped in a blue plastic bag, into gray metal cylinders bearing the same words. When the van turns onto Sumner, where the buildings have mail slots instead of boxes, the route man simply throws the wrapped papers at the front doors. Blue parcels thwack against the doors of the police station, the funeral home, and the office buildings. The post office does not get a paper.

What do you know, lights are burning behind the front downstairs windows of the police station. The door opens. A tall, dark-haired young man in a pale blue short-sleeved uniform shirt, a Sam Browne belt, and navy trousers steps outside. The wide belt and the gold badge on Bobby Dulac's chest gleam in the fresh sunlight, and everything he is wearing, including the 9mm pistol strapped to his hip, seems as newly made as Bobby Dulac himself. He watches the red van turn left onto Second Street, and frowns at the rolled newspaper. He nudges it with the tip of a black, highly polished shoe, bending over just far enough to suggest that he is trying to read the headlines through the plastic. Evidently this technique does not work all that well. Still frowning, Bobby tilts all the way over and picks up the newspaper with unexpected delicacy, the way a mother cat picks up a kitten in need of relocation. Holding it a little distance away from his body, he gives a quick glance up and down Sumner Street, about-faces smartly, and steps back into the station. We, who in our curiosity have been steadily descending toward the interesting spectacle presented by Officer Dulac, go inside behind him.

A gray corridor leads past a blank door and a bulletin board with very little on it to two sets of metal stairs, one going down to a small locker room, shower stalls, and a firing range, the other upward to an interrogation room and two facing rows of cells, none presently occupied. Somewhere near, a radio talk show is playing at a level that seems too loud for a peaceful morning.

Bobby Dulac opens the unmarked door and enters, with us on his shiny heels, the ready room he has just left. A rank of filing cabinets stands against the wall to our right, beside them a beat-up wooden table on which sit neat stacks of papers in folders and a transistor radio, the source of the discordant noise. From the nearby studio of KDCU-AM, Your Talk Voice in the Coulee Country, the entertainingly rabid George Rathbun has settled into *Badger Barrage*, his popular morning broadcast. Good old George sounds too loud for the occasion no matter how low you dial the volume; the guy is just flat-out noisy—that's part of his appeal.

Set in the middle of the wall directly opposite us is a closed door with a dark pebble-glass window on which has been painted DALE GILBERTSON, CHIEF OF POLICE. Dale will not be in for another half hour or so.

Two metal desks sit at right angles to each other in the corner to our left, and from the one that faces us, Tom Lund, a fair-haired officer of roughly his partner's age but without his appearance of having been struck gleaming from the mint five minutes before, regards the bag tweezed between two fingers of Bobby Dulac's right hand.

"All right," Lund says. "Okay. The latest installment."

"You thought maybe the Thunder Five was paying us another social call? Here. I don't want to read the damn thing."

Not deigning to look at the newspaper, Bobby sends the new day's issue of the *La Riviere Herald* sailing in a flat, fast arc across ten feet of wooden floor with an athletic snap of his wrist, spins rightward, takes a long stride, and positions himself in front of the wooden table a moment before Tom Lund fields his throw. Bobby glares at the two names and various details scrawled on the long chalkboard hanging on the wall behind the table. He is not pleased, Bobby Dulac; he looks as though he might burst out of his uniform through the sheer force of his anger.

Fat and happy in the KDCU studio, George Rathbun yells, "Caller, gimme a break, willya, and get your prescription fixed! Are we talking about the same game here? Caller—"

"Maybe Wendell got some sense and decided to lay off," Tom Lund says.

"Wendell," Bobby says. Because Lund can see only the sleek, dark back of his head, the little sneering thing he does with his lip wastes motion, but he does it anyway.

"Caller, let me ask you this one question, and in all sincerity, I want you to be honest with me. Did you actually see last night's game?"

"I didn't know Wendell was a big buddy of yours," Bobby says. "I didn't know you ever got as far south as La Riviere. Here I was thinking your idea of a big night out was a pitcher of beer and trying to break one hundred at the Arden Bowl-A-Drome, and now I find out you hang out with newspaper reporters in college towns. Probably get down and dirty with the Wisconsin Rat, too, that guy on KWLA. Do you pick up a lot of punk babes that way?"

The caller says he missed the first inning on account of he had to pick up his kid after a special counseling session at Mount Hebron, but he sure saw everything after that.

"Did I say Wendell Green was a friend of mine?" asks Tom Lund. Over Bobby's left shoulder he can see the first of the names on the chalkboard. His gaze helplessly focuses on it. "It's just, I met him after the Kinderling case, and the guy didn't seem so bad. Actually, I kind of liked him. Actually, I wound up feeling sorry for him. He wanted to do an interview with Hollywood, and Hollywood turned him down flat."

Well, naturally he saw the extra innings, the hapless caller says, that's how he knows Pokey Reese was safe.

"And as for the Wisconsin Rat, I wouldn't know him if I saw him, and I think that so-called music he plays sounds like the worst bunch of crap I ever heard in my life. How did that scrawny pasty-face creep get a radio show in the first place? On the college station? What does that tell you about our wonderful UW-La Riviere, Bobby? What does it say about our whole society? Oh, I forgot, you like that shit."

"No, I like 311 and Korn, and you're so out of it you can't tell the difference between Jonathan Davis and Dee Dee Ramone, but forget about that, all right?" Slowly, Bobby Dulac turns around and smiles at his partner. "Stop stalling." His smile is none too pleasant.

"I'm stalling?" Tom Lund widens his eyes in a parody of wounded innocence. "Gee, was it me who fired the paper across the room? No, I guess not."

"If you never laid eyes on the Wisconsin Rat, how come you know what he looks like?"

"Same way I know he has funny-colored hair and a pierced nose. Same way I know he wears a beat-to-shit black leather jacket day in, day out, rain or shine."

Bobby waited.

"By the way he sounds. People's voices are full of information. A guy says, Looks like it'll turn out to be a nice day, he tells you his whole life story. Want to know something else about Rat Boy? He hasn't been to the dentist in six, seven years. His teeth look like shit."

From within KDCU's ugly cement-block structure next to the brewery on Peninsula Drive, via the radio Dale Gilbertson donated to the station house long before either Tom Lund or Bobby Dulac first put on their uniforms, comes good old dependable George Rathbun's patented bellow of genial outrage, a passionate, inclusive uproar that for a hundred miles around causes breakfasting farmers to smile across their tables at their wives and passing truckers to laugh out loud.

"I swear, caller, and this goes for my last last caller, too, and every single one of you out there, I love you *dearly*, that is the honest truth, I love you like my momma loved her *turnip patch*, but sometimes you people DRIVE ME CRAZY! Oh, boy. *Top of the eleventh inning, two outs! Six-seven, Reds! Men on second and third. Batter lines to short center field, Reese takes off from third, good throw to the plate, clean tag, clean tag. A BLIND MAN COULDA MADE THAT CALL!*"

"Hey, I thought it was a good tag, and I only heard it on the radio," says Tom Lund.

Both men are stalling, and they know it.

"In fact," shouts the hands-down most popular Talk Voice of the Coulee Country, "let me go out on a *limb* here, boys and girls, let me make the following *recommendation*, okay? Let's replace every umpire at Miller Park, hey, every umpire in the *National League*, with BLIND MEN! You know what, my friends? I *guarantee* a sixty to seventy percent *improvement* in the accuracy of their calls. GIVE THE JOB TO THOSE WHO CAN HANDLE IT—THE BLIND!"

Mirth suffuses Tom Lund's bland face. That George Rathbun, man, he's a hoot. Bobby says, "Come on, okay?"

Grinning. Lund pulls the folded newspaper out of its wrapper and flattens it on his desk. His face hardens, without altering its shape, his grin turns stony. "Oh, no. Oh, hell."

"What?"

Lund utters a shapeless groan and shakes his head.

"Jesus. I don't even want to know." Bobby rams his hands into his pockets, then pulls himself perfectly upright, jerks his right hand free, and clamps it over his eyes. "I'm a blind guy, all right? Make me an umpire—I don't wanna be a cop anymore."

Lund says nothing.

"It's a headline? Like a banner headline? How bad is it?" Bobby pulls his hand away from his eyes and holds it suspended in midair.

"Well," Lund tells him, "it looks like Wendell didn't get some sense, after all, and he sure as hell didn't decide to lay off. I can't believe I said I liked the dipshit."

"Wake up," Bobby says. "Nobody ever told you law enforcement officers and journalists are on opposite sides of the fence?"

Tom Lund's ample torso tilts over his desk. A thick lateral crease like a scar divides his forehead, and his stolid cheeks burn crimson. He aims a finger at Bobby Dulac. "This is one thing that really gets me about you, Bobby. How long have you been here? Five, six months? Dale hired me four years ago, and when him and Hollywood put the cuffs on Mr. Thornberg *Kinderling*, which was the biggest case in this county for maybe thirty years, I can't claim any credit, but at least I pulled my weight. I helped put some of the pieces together."

"One of the pieces," Bobby says.

"I reminded Dale about the girl bartender at the Taproom, and Dale told Hollywood, and Hollywood talked to the girl, and that was a big, big piece. It helped get him. So don't you talk to me that way."

Bobby Dulac assumes a look of completely hypothetical contrition. "Sorry, Tom. I guess I'm kind of wound up and beat to shit at the same time." What he thinks is. *So you got a couple years on me and you once gave Dale this crappy little bit of information, so what, I'm a better cop than you'll ever be. How heroic were you last night, anyhow?*

At 11.15 the previous night, Armand "Beezer" St. Pierre and his fellow travelers in the Thunder Five had roared up from Nailhouse Row to surge into the police station and demand of its three occupants, each of whom had

worked an eighteen-hour shift, exact details of the progress they were making on the issue that most concerned them all. What the hell was going on here? What about the third one, huh, what about Irma Freneau? Had they found her yet? Did these clowns have *anything*, or were they still just blowing smoke? You need help? Beezer roared. Then deputize us, we'll give you all the goddamn help you need and then some. A giant named Mouse had strolled smirking up to Bobby Dulac and kept on strolling, jumbo belly to six-pack belly, until Bobby was backed up against a filing cabinet, whereupon the giant Mouse had mysteriously inquired, in a cloud of beer and marijuana, whether Bobby had ever dipped into the works of a gentleman named Jacques Derrida. When Bobby replied that he had never heard of the gentleman, Mouse said, "No shit, Sherlock," and stepped aside to glare at the names on the chalkboard. Half an hour later, Beezer, Mouse, and their companions were sent away unsatisfied, undeputized, but pacified, and Dale Gilbertson said he had to go home and get some sleep, but Tom ought to remain, just in case. The regular night men had both found excuses not to come in. Bobby said he would stay, too, no problem, Chief, which is why we find these two men in the station so early in the morning.

"Give it to me," says Bobby Dulac.

Lund picks up the paper, turns it around, and holds it out for Bobby to see: FISHERMAN STILL AT LARGE IN FRENCH LANDING AREA, reads the headline over an article that takes up three columns on the top left-hand side of the front page. The columns of type have been printed against a background of pale blue, and a black border separates them from the remainder of the page. Beneath the head, in smaller print, runs the line *Identity of Psycho Killer Baffles Police*. Underneath the subhead, a line in even smaller print attributes the article to Wendell Green, with the support of the editorial staff.

"The Fisherman," Bobby says. "Right from the start, your friend has his thumb up his butt. The Fisherman, the Fisherman, the Fisherman. If I all of a sudden turned into a fifty-foot ape and started stomping on buildings, would you call me King Kong?" Lund lowers the newspaper and smiles. "Okay," Bobby allows, "bad example. Say I held up a couple banks. Would you call me John Dillinger?"

"Well," says Lund, smiling even more broadly, "they say Dillinger's tool was so humongous, they put it in a jar in the Smithsonian. So . . ."

"Read me the first sentence," Bobby says.

Tom Lund looks down and reads. " 'As the police in French Landing fail to discover any leads to the identity of the fiendish double murderer and sex criminal this reporter has dubbed "the Fisherman," the grim specters of fear, despair, and suspicion run increasingly rampant through the streets of that little town, and from there out into the farms and villages throughout French County, darkening by their touch every portion of the Coulee Country.' "

"Just what we need," Bobby says. "Jee-zus!" And in an instant has crossed the room and is leaning over Tom Lund's shoulder, reading the *Herald's* front page with his hand resting on the butt of his Glock, as if ready to drill a hole in the article right here and now.

" 'Our traditions of trust and good neighborliness, our habit of extending warmth and generosity to all [writes Wendell Green, editorializing like crazy], are eroding daily under the corrosive onslaught of these dread emotions. Fear, despair, and suspicion are poisonous to the soul of communities large and small, for they turn neighbor against neighbor and make a mockery of civility

" 'Two children have been foully murdered and their remains partially consumed. Now a third child has disappeared. Eight-year-old Amy St. Pierre and seven-year-old Johnny Irkenham fell victim to the passions of a monster in human form. Neither will know the happiness of adolescence or the satisfactions of adulthood. Their grieving parents will never know the grandchildren they would have cherished. The parents of Amy and Johnny's playmates shelter their children within the safety of their own homes, as do parents whose children never knew the deceased. As a result, summer playgroups and other programs for young children have been canceled in virtually every township and municipality in French County

" 'With the disappearance of ten-year-old Irma Freneau seven days after the death of Amy St. Pierre and only three after that of Johnny Irkenham, public patience has grown dangerously thin. As this correspondent has already reported, Merlin Graashelmer, fifty-two, an unemployed farm laborer of no fixed abode, was set upon and beaten by an unidentified group of men in a Gralinger side street late Tuesday evening. Another such episode occurred in the early hours of Thursday morning, when Elvar Praetorius, thirty-six, a Swedish tourist traveling alone, was assaulted by three men, again unidentified, while asleep in La Riviere's Leif Eriksson Park. Graasheimer and Praetorius required only routine medical attention, but future incidents of vigilantism will almost certainly end more seriously.' "

Tom Lund looks down at the next paragraph, which describes the Freneau girl's abrupt disappearance from a Chase Street sidewalk, and pushes himself away from his desk.

Bobby Dulac reads silently for a time, then says, "You gotta hear this shit, Tom. This is how he winds up:

" 'When will the Fisherman strike again?

" 'For he will strike again, my friends, make no mistake.

" 'And when will French Landing's chief of police, Dale Gilbertson, do his duty and rescue the citizens of this county from the obscene savagery of the Fisherman and the understandable violence produced by his own inaction?' "

Bobby Dulac stamps to the middle of the room. His color has heightened. He inhales, then exhales a magnificent quantity of oxygen. "How about the next time the Fisherman *strikes*," Bobby says, "how about he goes right up Wendell Green's flabby rear end?"

"I'm with you," says Tom Lund. "Can you believe that shunola? 'Understandable violence'? He's telling people it's okay to mess with anyone who looks suspicious!"

Bobby levels an index finger at Lund. "I personally am going to nail this guy. That is a promise. I'll bring him down, alive or dead." In case Lund may have missed the point, he repeats, "Personally."

Wisely choosing not to speak the words that first come to his mind, Tom Lund nods his head. The finger is still pointing. He says, "If you want some help with that, maybe you should talk to Hollywood. Dale didn't have no luck, but could be you'd do better."

Bobby waves this notion away. "No need. Dale and me . . . and you, too, of course, we got it covered. But I personally am going to get this guy. That is a guarantee." He pauses for a second. "Besides, Hollywood retired when he moved here, or did you forget?"

"Hollywood's too young to retire," Lund says. "Even in cop years, the guy is practically a baby. So you must be the next thing to a fetus."

And on their cackle of shared laughter, we float away and out of the ready room and back into the sky, where we glide one block farther north, to Queen Street.

Turn the page for a preview of Stephen King and
Peter Straub's

The Talisman

Coming soon in hardcover, paperback, and ebook
from Scribner and Pocket Books

ONE
JACK LIGHTS OUT

The Alhambra Inn and Gardens

1

On September 15th, 1981, a boy named Jack Sawyer stood where the water and land come together, hands in the pockets of his jeans, looking out at the steady Atlantic. He was twelve years old and tall for his age. The sea-breeze swept back his brown hair, probably too long, from a fine, clear brow. He stood there, filled with the confused and painful emotions he had lived with for the last three months—since the time when his mother had closed their house on Rodeo Drive in Los Angeles and, in a flurry of furniture, checks, and real-estate agents, rented an apartment on Central Park West. From that apartment they had fled to this quiet resort on New Hampshire's tiny seacoast. Order and regularity had disappeared from Jack's world. His life seemed as shifting, as uncontrolled, as the heaving water before him. His mother was moving him through the world, twitching him from place to place; but what moved his mother?

His mother was running, running.

Jack turned around, looking up the empty beach first to the left, then to the right. To the left was Arcadia Funworld, an amusement park that ran all racket and roar from Memorial Day to Labor Day. It stood empty and still now, a heart between beats. The roller coaster was a scaffold against that featureless, overcast sky, the uprights and angled supports like strokes done in charcoal. Down there was his new friend, Speedy Parker, but the boy could not think about Speedy Parker now. To the right was the Alhambra Inn and Gardens, and that was where the boy's thoughts relentlessly took him. On the day of their arrival Jack had momentarily thought he'd seen a rainbow over its domed and gambreled roof. A sign of sorts, a promise of better things. But there had been no rainbow. A weathervane spun right-left, left-right, caught in a crosswind. He had got out of their rented car, ignoring his mother's unspoken desire for him to do something about the luggage, and looked up. Above the spinning brass cock of the weathervane hung only a blank sky.

"Open the trunk and get the bags, sonny boy," his mother had called to him. "This broken-down old actress wants to check in and hunt down a drink."

"An elementary martini," Jack had said.

"'You're not so old,' you were supposed to say." She was pushing herself effortfully off the carseat.

"You're not so old."

She gleamed at him—a glimpse of the old, go-to-hell Lily Cavanaugh (Sawyer), queen of two decades' worth of B movies. She straightened her back. "It's going to be okay here, Jacky," she had said. "Everything's going to be okay here. This is a good place."

A seagull drifted over the roof of the hotel, and for a second Jack had the disquieting sensation that the weathervane had taken flight.

"We'll get away from the phone calls for a while, right?"

"Sure," Jack had said. She wanted to hide from Uncle Morgan, she wanted no more wrangles with her dead husband's business partner, she wanted to crawl into bed with an elementary martini and hoist the covers over her head. . . .

Mom, what's wrong with you?

There was too much death, the world was half-made of death. The gull cried out overhead.

"Andelay, kid, andelay," his mother had said. "Let's get into the Great Good Place."

Then, Jack had thought *At least there's always Uncle Tommy to help out in case things get really hairy.*

But Uncle Tommy was already dead, it was just that the news was still on the other end of a lot of telephone wires.

2

The Alhambra hung out over the water, a great Victorian pile on gigantic granite blocks which seemed to merge almost seamlessly with the low headland—a jutting collarbone of granite here on the few scant miles of New Hampshire seacoast. The formal gardens on its landward side were barely visible from Jack's beach-front angle—a dark green flip of hedge, that was all. The brass cock stood against the sky, quartering west by northwest. A plaque in the lobby announced that it was here, in 1838, that the Northern Methodist Conference had held the first of the great New

England abolition rallies. Daniel Webster had spoken at fiery, inspired length. According to the plaque, Webster had said "From this day forward, know that slavery as an American institution has begun to sicken and must soon die in all our states and territorial lands."

■

So they had arrived, on that day last week which had ended the turmoil of their months in New York. In Arcadia Beach there were no lawyers employed by Morgan Sloat popping out of cars and waving papers which had to be signed, had to be filed, Mrs. Sawyer. In Arcadia Beach the telephones did not ring out from noon until three in the morning (Uncle Morgan appeared to forget that residents of Central Park West were not on California time). In fact the telephones in Arcadia Beach rang not at all.

On the way into the little resort town, his mother driving with squinty-eyed concentration, Jack had seen only one person on the streets—a mad old man desultorily pushing an empty shopping cart along a sidewalk. Above them was that blank gray sky, an uncomfortable sky. In total contrast to New York, here there was only the steady sound of the wind, hooting up deserted streets that looked much too wide with no traffic to fill them. Here were empty shops with signs in the windows saying *OPEN WEEKENDS ONLY* or, even worse, *SEE YOU IN JUNE!* There were a hundred empty parking places on the street before the Alhambra, empty tables in the Arcadia Tea and Jam Shoppe next door.

And shabby-crazy old men pushed shopping carts along deserted streets.

"I spent the happiest three weeks of my life in this funny little place," Lily told him, driving past the old man (who turned, Jack saw, to look after them with frightened suspicion—he was mouthing something but Jack could not tell what it was) and then swinging the car up the curved drive through the front gardens of the hotel.

For that was why they had bundled everything they could not live without into suitcases and satchels and plastic shopping bags, turned the key in the lock on the apartment door (ignoring the shrill ringing of the telephone, which seemed to penetrate that same keyhole and pursue them down the hall), that was why they had filled the trunk and back seat of the rented car with all their overflowing boxes and bags and spent hours crawling north along the Henry Hudson Parkway, then many more hours pounding up I-95—because Lily Cavanaugh Sawyer had once been happy

here. In 1968, the year before Jack's birth, Lily had been nominated for an Academy Award for her role in a picture called *Blaze*. *Blaze* was a better movie than most of Lily's, and in it she had been able to demonstrate a much richer talent than her usual bad-girl roles had revealed. Nobody expected Lily to win, least of all Lily; but for Lily the customary cliché about the real honor being in the nomination was honest truth—she did feel honored, deeply and genuinely, and to celebrate this one moment of real professional recognition, Phil Sawyer had wisely taken her for three weeks to the Alhambra Inn and Gardens, on the other side of the continent, where they had watched the Oscars while drinking champagne in bed. (If Jack had been older, and had he had an occasion to care, he might have done the necessary subtraction and discovered that the Alhambra had been the place of his essential beginning.)

When the Supporting Actress nominations were read, according to family legend, Lily had growled to Phil, "If I win this thing and I'm not there, I'll do the Monkey on your chest in my *stiletto heels*."

But when Ruth Gordon had won, Lily had said, "Sure, she deserves it, she's a great kid." And had immediately poked her husband in the middle of the chest and said, "You'd better get me another part like that, you big-shot agent you."

There had been no more parts like that. Lily's last role, two years after Phil's death, had been that of a cynical ex-prostitute in a film called *Motorcycle Maniacs*.

It was that period Lily was commemorating now, Jack knew as he hauled the baggage out of the trunk and the back seat. A D'Agostino bag had torn right down through the big *o'ala* and a jumble of rolled-up socks, loose photographs, chessmen and the board, and comic books had dribbled over all else in the trunk. Jack managed to get most of this stuff into other bags. Lily was moving slowly up the hotel steps, pulling herself along on the railing like an old lady. "I'll find the bellhop," she said without turning around.

Jack straightened up from the bulging bags and looked again at the sky where he was sure he had seen a rainbow. There was no rainbow, only that uncomfortable, shifting sky.

Then:

"Come to me," someone said behind him in a small and perfectly audible voice.

"What?" he asked, turning around. The empty gardens and drive stretched out before him.

"Yes?" his mother said. She looked crickie-backed, leaning over the knob of the great wooden door.

"Mistake," he said. There had been no voice, no rainbow. He forgot both and looked up at his mother, who was struggling with the vast door. "Hold on, I'll help," he called, and trotted up the steps, awkwardly carrying a big suitcase and a straining paper bag filled with sweaters.

■

Until he met Speedy Parker, Jack had moved through the days at the hotel as unconscious of the passage of time as a sleeping dog. His entire life seemed almost dreamlike to him during these days, full of shadows and inexplicable transitions. Even the terrible news about Uncle Tommy which had come down the telephone wires the night before had not entirely awakened him, as shocking as it had been. If Jack had been a mystic, he might have thought that other forces had taken him over and were manipulating his mother's life and his own. Jack Sawyer at twelve was a being who required things to do, and the noiseless passivity of these days, after the hubbub of Manhattan, had confused and undone him in some basic way.

Jack had found himself standing on the beach with no recollection of having gone there, no idea of what he was doing there at all. He supposed he was mourning Uncle Tommy, but it was as though his mind had gone to sleep, leaving his body to fend for itself. He could not concentrate long enough to grasp the plots of the sitcoms he and Lily watched at night, much less keep the nuances of fiction in his head.

"You're tired from all this moving around," his mother said, dragging deeply on a cigarette and squinting at him through the smoke. "All you have to do, Jack-O, is relax for a little while. This is a good place. Let's enjoy it as long as we can."

Bob Newhart, before them in a slightly too-reddish color on the set, bemusedly regarded a shoe he held in his right hand.

"That's what I'm doing, Jacky." She smiled at him. "Relaxing and enjoying it."

He peeked at his watch. Two hours had passed while they sat in front of the television, and he could not remember anything that had preceded this program.

Jack was getting up to go to bed when the phone rang. Good old Uncle Morgan Sloat had found them. Uncle Morgan's news was never very great, but this was apparently a blockbuster even by Uncle Morgan's standards. Jack stood in the middle of the room, watching as his mother's face grew paler, palest. Her hand crept to her throat, where new lines had appeared over the last few months, and pressed lightly. She said barely a word until the end, when she whispered, "Thank you, Morgan," and hung up. She had turned to Jack then, looking older and sicker than ever.

"Got to be tough now, Jacky, all right?"

He hadn't felt tough.

She took his hand then and told him.

"Uncle Tommy was killed in a hit-and-run accident this afternoon, Jack."

He gasped, feeling as if the wind had been torn out of him.

"He was crossing La Cienega Boulevard and a van hit him. There was a witness who said it was black, and that the words *WILD CHILD* were written on the side, but that was . . . was all."

Lily began to cry. A moment later, almost surprised, Jack began to cry as well. All of that had happened three days ago, and to Jack it seemed forever.

5

On September 15th, 1981, a boy named Jack Sawyer stood looking out at the steady water as he stood on an unmarked beach before a hotel that looked like a castle in a Sir Walter Scott novel. He wanted to cry but was unable to release his tears. He was surrounded by death, death made up half the world, there were no rainbows. The *WILD CHILD* van had subtracted Uncle Tommy from the world. Uncle Tommy, dead in L.A., too far from the east coast, where even a kid like Jack knew he really belonged. A man who felt he had to put on a tie before going out to get a roast beef sandwich at Arby's had no business on the west coast at all.

His father was dead, Uncle Tommy was dead, his mother might be dying. He felt death here, too, at Arcadia Beach, where it spoke through telephones in Uncle Morgan's voice. It was nothing as cheap or obvious as the melancholy feel of a resort in the off-season, where one kept stumbling over the Ghosts of Summers Past; it seemed to be in the texture of things, a smell

on the ocean breeze. He was scared . . . and he had been scared for a long time. Being here, where it was so quiet, had only helped him to realize it—had helped him to realize that maybe Death had driven all the way up I-95 from New York, squinting out through cigarette smoke and asking him to find some bop on the car radio.

He could remember—vaguely—his father telling him that he was born with an old head, but his head didn't feel old now. Right now, his head felt very young. Scared, he thought. *I'm pretty damn scared. This is where the world ends, right?*

Seagulls coursed the gray air overhead. The silence was as gray as the air—as deadly as the growing circles under her eyes.

6

When he had wandered into Funworld and met Lester Speedy Parker after he did not quite know how many days of numbly drifting through time, that passive feeling of being *on hold* had somehow left him. Lester Parker was a black man with crinkly gray hair and heavy lines cutting through his cheeks. He was utterly unremarkable now despite whatever he had accomplished in his earlier life as a travelling blues musician. Nor had he said anything particularly remarkable. Yet as soon as Jack had walked aimlessly into Funworld's game arcade and met Speedy's pale eyes he felt all the fuzziness leave him. He had become himself again. It was as if a magical current had passed directly from the old man into Jack. Speedy had smiled at him and said, "Well, it looks like I got me some company. Little travellin man just walked in."

It was true, he was not *on hold* anymore. Just an instant before, he had seemed to be wrapped in wet wool and cotton candy, and now he was set free. A silvery nimbus seemed to play about the old man for an instant, a little aureole of light which disappeared as soon as Jack blinked. For the first time Jack saw that the man was holding the handle of a wide heavy push-broom.

"You okay, son?" The handyman put one hand in the small of his back, and stretched backward. "The world just get worse, or did she get better?"

"Uh, better," Jack said.

"Then you come to the right place, I'd say. What do they call you?"

Little travellin man, Speedy had said that first day, *ole Travellin Jack*. He had leaned his tall angular body against the Skee-Ball machine and wrapped

his arms around the broom-handle as though it were a girl at a dance. The man you see here is Lester Speedy Parker, formerly a travellin man hisself, son, hee hee—oh yeah, Speedy knew the road, he knew all the roads, way back in the old days. Had me a band, Travellin Jack, played the blues. Gittar blues. Made me a few records, too, but I won't shame you by asking if you ever heard em. Every syllable had its own rhythmic lilt, every phrase its rimshot and backbeat. Speedy Parker carried a broom instead of a guitar, but he was still a musician. Within the first five seconds of talking to Speedy, Jack had known that his jazz-loving father would have relished this man's company.

He had tagged along behind Speedy for the better part of three or four days, watching him work and helping out when he could. Speedy let him bang in nails, sand down a picket or two that needed paint; these simple tasks done under Speedy's instructions were the only schooling he was getting, but they made him feel better. Jack now saw his first days in Arcadia Beach as a period of unrelieved wretchedness from which his new friend had rescued him. For Speedy Parker was a friend, that was certain—so certain, in fact, that in it was a quantity of mystery. In the few days since Jack had shaken off his daze (or since Speedy had shaken it off for him by dispelling it with one glance of his light-colored eyes), Speedy Parker had become closer to him than any other friend, with the possible exception of Richard Skoat, whom Jack had known approximately since the cradle. And now, counteracting his terror at losing Uncle Tommy and his fear that his mother was actually dying, he felt the tug of Speedy's warm wise presence from just down the street.

Again, and uncomfortably, Jack had his old sense of *being directed*, of being manipulated: as if a long invisible wire had pulled himself and his mother up to this abandoned place by the sea.

They wanted him here, whoever *they* were.

Or was that just crazy? In his inner vision he saw a bent old man, clearly out of his mind, muttering to himself as he pushed an empty shopping cart down the sidewalk.

A gull screamed in the air, and Jack promised himself that he would make himself talk about some of his feelings with Speedy Parker. Even if Speedy thought he was nuts, even if he laughed at Jack. He would not laugh, Jack secretly knew. They were old friends because one of the things

Jack understood about the old custodian was that he could say almost anything to him.

But he was not ready for all that yet. It was all too crazy, and he did not understand it yet himself. Almost reluctantly Jack turned his back on Funworld and trudged across the sand toward the hotel.



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